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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000083

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SUBJECT: COUP RUMORS HAVE BANGKOK ON EDGE

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Troop movements on the evening of January 4 prompted a flurry of rumors that another coup d'etat, or some sort of military crackdown, was underway. Council for National Security Chairman Sonthi Boonyaratglin publicly denied cause for concern, but the rumors both indicate and likely will exacerbate tension within the current government. An Embassy contact with good sources in southern Thailand said his soundings indicated southern separatists likely were not involved in the December 31 bombings. Police officials have confirmed to us that the three police kiosks bombed on December 31 were empty, although they should have been manned -- heightening suspicion of police foreknowledge of the attacks. End Summary.

TROOP MOVEMENTS PROMPT COUP RUMORS

12. (C) On the evening of January 4, Embassy sources from various sectors, including the police, contacted us to relay news of unusual troop movements. The JUSMAG Chief phoned a high-ranking military officer, who assured him that ongoing troop movements were part of a regular rotation. Nevertheless, rumors were rife that Council for National Security (CNS) member General Saprang Kalayanamitr was behind the movements, due to his dissatisfaction with the current regime's "softness" against those seeking to undermine the interim government (e.g., former Thai Rak Thai officials). People drew various conclusions, ranging from a coup against Surayud Chulanont's administration to a military-led crackdown against officials associated with the previous government.

13. (C) Responding to the rumors, the Defense Attache contacted Saprang, who claimed to be at home, after having had dinner with foreign contacts. Saprang also told the Defense Attache that ongoing troop movements were part of a regular rotation; troops that had been in Bangkok since December 31 were departing, and others from Ubon Ratjasima were heading south. Saprang attributed the alarmist rumors to opposition figures (specifically, former Prime Minister Chavalit) trying to drive a wedge between himself and CNS Chairman Sonthi Boonyaratglin. Sonthi engaged in media interviews on the night of January 4, to assure the public that there was no reason to be concerned about the soldiers' movements.

14. (C) Meanwhile, the war of words between Chavalit and Saprang has become increasingly ugly. January 5 press

reports quoted Saprang as saying "I hope the public will... compare between my (aristocratic) family roots and a shyster." Meanwhile, a surrogate of Chavalit's claimed his patron did not deign to respond to Saprang, who "will soon be dead." A longtime observer of the Thai military cautioned us that the bitter public conflict between these two figures would exacerbate factionalism in the Army and could galvanize officers of various ranks who had been disadvantaged by the CNS seizure of power.

¶5. (C) Comment: Regardless of who detonated the December 31 bombs in Bangkok, the attacks have heightened tension not only between the CNS and its opponents, but also within the ruling clique. Despite the outward appearance of calm following the September 19 coup, it seems clear that there are important political forces which have yet to reach equilibrium. The January 4 rumor flurry, coming on the heels of the New Year's Eve attacks and the clumsy imposition of capital controls, will likely further decrease public confidence in the current government and heighten the anxiety of top officials. End Comment.

DISPUTING SOUTHERN INVOLVEMENT IN BOMBINGS

¶6. (C) Human Rights Watch Asia's Sunai Phasuk (strictly protect) told us he is "really convinced" that southern militants were not connected to the bombings. Sunai, who has a deep pool of contacts in the South, including members of several insurgent groups, said his contacts uniformly denied that any separatists were involved in the bombing. According to Sunai, several of his contacts made the point that the southern insurgent groups have long had the capability to conduct bomb attacks in the capital but have refrained from

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doing so because they are fighting to regain control of their home territory in the South. As one insurgent put it, "We are fighting to free our homes, the battleground is Pattani, not Bangkok. What would be the point?"

¶7. (C) A separate contact of Sunai's, who is involved in the manufacture of IEDs used in the South, also said that the bombs used in the South are more lethal, and a separatist attack in Bangkok would have been designed to kill many more people. Sunai firmly believes that political actors -- most likely with ties to former PM Chavalit Yongchaiyudh -- were behind the bombings. According to Sunai, the bomb attacks were designed to discredit the government and to distract the public from the ongoing corruption investigations of former Prime Minister Thaksin and his supporters. Sunai also said that the government leaders' response to the bombings -- blaming political figures, but failing to offer evidence or make arrests -- just makes it appear weaker. Sunai personally believes that the government and CNS are "good people" but are increasingly ineffective.

¶8. (C) Anthony Davis of Jane's Intelligence (protect) is likewise "convinced" that the mainstream separatist groups (i.e. BRN-C, PULO, GMIP, etc) were not involved in the bombings. According to Davis, the main militant groups have long had the ability to conduct operations in Bangkok but have chosen not to, and there is no reason to do so now. In the past, insurgent leaders have publicly denied a desire to attack Bangkok, he said. Davis noted, however, that Thai and third country security contacts of his, while agreeing that mainstream separatists were likely not involved, suggested that political actors in Bangkok with connections to the South may have played a part in the bombing. He alluded to the Wadah faction of former Prime Minister Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party, which includes southern Muslims, some with alleged links to separatists. Davis admitted that this theory remains "murky," however.

WHERE WERE THE COPS?

¶9. (C) Our police contacts have confirmed that there were no officers on duty at all three of the police posts that were bombed, adding to suspicions that the police -- who are worried that the military dominated government is trying to sideline them -- were involved somehow.

¶10. (C/NF) A trusted contact told us that on December 31 he heard comments on a police Special Branch radio (strictly protect) that could be interpreted as showing police foreknowledge of the attacks. Our contact claimed that during the round of bombings early in the evening, an unidentified voice on the radio warned one or more associates, "There are two more..." After the midnight explosions, a voice informed, "It's over."

¶11. (U) Open sources reported that, at the Nonthaburi bomb site, eight closed circuit television cameras mysteriously ceased functioning three hours prior to the first explosions.

A LITTLE RUMOR GOES A LONG WAY

¶12. (C) Initial press reports on the bomb attacks cited police information that the initials "IRK" had been spray painted onto electrical poles at several attack sites, leading to press speculation that "IRK" was a new insurgent group behind the bombs. Some of our police contacts, however, report that a local Western grafitti artist has contacted police to explain that this is his "tag" which was coincidentally located near several of the bomb locations, as well as in numerous areas that were not bombed.
BOYCE